



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE VALUE OF STATE ART COMMISSIONS*

BY WALTER GILMAN PAGE

SECRETARY OF THE MASSACHUSETTS STATE ART COMMISSION

THE basic idea which brings into life such a body as is constituted under the designation of "Art Commission" is to protect a community from having thrust upon it the results of the sort of innocent ignorance which it has been the fate of many cities and towns to suffer at the hands of some State or Civic Committee organized for the express purpose of placing in concrete form a memorial to some distinguished fellow being who, if alive, would no doubt shudder at the in-artistic crime committed in his name.

Whether it be a State or Municipal Art Commission the guiding and governing fundamental idea is the same.

Art Commissions in the beginning came into existence through the effect of an aroused public opinion, naturally the more refined and educated portion of the citizenship being the leaders, and such a protest and such a demand for protection in the future is usually caused by just such an event as led to the establishment of the Boston Art Commission, perhaps the first of its kind, through the placing of a statue in the Public Garden to commemorate the deeds of a certain brave officer who served Massachusetts during the War of the States, the statue being as bad in an art sense as the officer's services were brilliant on the field, therefore the first duty of the new Commission was the substitution of a bronze work of art for the stone image to which, however, we owe a certain amount of gratitude. An Art Commission wherever established has amply justified its creation, and people do not wait to be shocked into a demand for a body of experts, but as happened this last session of the Massachusetts Legislature an Act was passed, being in effect the granting of powers to cities and towns to establish Art Commissions whenever desired. This Act has regulated

the method of appointment and all details necessary, so the path has been made clear and easy; in consequence I look to the time in the very near future when in Massachusetts, at least, a town without an Art Commission will be as rare as a town without a library.

The Massachusetts State Art Commission was created by Act of the Legislature June, 1910. While the city of Boston has had a Commission for many years, yet its powers did not include property belonging to the Commonwealth, consequently the most important building within city limits, together with the grounds about it, lay entirely at the mercy of special commissions appointed to carry out acts of the Great and General Court, whenever that august body decided to honor some dead and gone citizen; and the result of years of unrestrained freedom is apparent enough to the intelligent eye-witness.

A sympathetic and helpful member of the Committee on Education and the equally responsive attitude of the Chief Executive brought the bill through in triumph. Governor Draper had free rein to appoint whom he saw fit and selected five gentlemen, two of that number being professional men, one a painter, the other an architect; the other members men of wide culture and knowledge of art, though not engaged in any profession directly related to the arts.

This Commission is very happily constituted and started in the right path at the outset by agreeing to adopt the educational and co-operative rather than the judicially and coldly critical point of view.

An almost immediate proof of the value of this attitude came to the Commission in the shape of a proposition to erect a monument in a sister State, and the Military Commission in charge went about the

*A paper read at the Annual Convention of the American Federation of Arts, held at Washington, D. C., May 17, 18, 19, 1911.

matter in the only way it knew, that is, it awarded the contract to some graveyard concern and the design as submitted had all the characteristic features usual with such efforts. The only idea predominating was to impress upon the mind of the man in the street that his State got a whole lot for the money when this particular memorial was erected, and this was true, for the design was endowed with a sample of every known kind of form used in the past. We have all seen these wonderful conceptions—our cities and towns are dotted with them—but the Commonwealth of Massachusetts has one less to its discredit, because it possessed an Art Commission.

Now, instead of turning down this design and making a report to the Governor, which indeed was all that the law required, the Commission labored in a kindly spirit and in an advisory capacity with the special Monument Commission and the happy result was that a new design was submitted, this time drawn by a competent architect, which was duly approved and all was peace and harmony, whereas the germ of discord might have blossomed into a serious controversy, wherein the value of State Art Commissions and their power of resistance to political dislike might have clashed with the result that the future of the Commission might have been imperiled.

I have been somewhat specific in using our Massachusetts Commission as an illustration, but the work of such a body, whether in New York or Illinois, must run along quite similar lines, and experiences cannot help but be more or less parallel.

What value are State Art Commissions? In other words, what is their excuse for being? If five citizens are willing to devote their time and best abilities, giving their services gratuitously for the benefit of their Commonwealth, the community gains that much through force of example, and if these services tend, as they needs must, to a wider and better knowledge and a higher appreciation of the beauty that lies in a well-ordered landscape with an intelligent arrangement of sculptural adornment, such as a Metropolitan Park

affords, a vast deal is gained, for such a happy conjunction reacts on the subconsciousness of the individual, until, through repeated examples, the citizenship are led to believe in and stand behind the efforts of their leaders. A thing which is badly done has to be done again in a far better way at some period of time. Have we not seen this happen in many instances? What chances would certain statues and monuments have today were they to come before expert commissions?

It is gradually dawning on the people at large that there is some virtue in the expert idea as related to matters of art. We have experts on the food question, on transportation, on a hundred and one things, so why not on what affects the proper direction of the esthetic side of life? If art is the handmaid of religion, then it must be recognized as coming pretty close to the great body of the people.

There are, in many States, Commissions with which the Art Commission should co-operate, such as Park Commissions and those having charge of institutions. Even a Prison Commission could well be influenced to plan for a place of confinement which would give Hope a handmaiden, in that the walls, while impregnable, need not necessarily be cheerless in their outward aspect—and the co-operation would result in more intelligent planning so far as the artistic features were concerned. An institution whose object is the result of an imperfect social condition need not because of that be a blot on the landscape. A hospital for the insane need not produce a shudder of horror. The reason for the existence of such an institution is sad enough to contemplate without the stern and forbidding structure devoid of all attempt to soften the stern reality through the kindly offices of art. I have been led to refer to these matters because art has a broader mission than merely to please the sense of outward vision; it means the uplift of all humanity, and an Art Commission in the truest sense is not just a group of critics, but real leaders, as well as co-workers with all who have to do the work of the people.